

## 2008 Virginia School Readiness Report Executive Summary

A top priority for Virginia's policy makers, early childhood educators, and researchers is to ensure that young children are provided opportunities and experiences that prepare them to enter school ready to learn. Virginia's definition of school readiness focuses not only on whether a child has acquired basic skills in areas of literacy, mathematics, science, history, social science, physical and motor development, and personal and social development, but also on the capacities of families, schools and communities to best support children's acquisition of these skills. The 2008 Virginia School Readiness Report, prepared by the Virginia School Readiness Task Force, summarizes recent statewide efforts to promote school readiness in Virginia in three areas—*developing infrastructure* to support a comprehensive strategy to improve school readiness, *conducting research* about access to and quality of preschool in Virginia, and *creating resources* to guide school readiness improvement efforts. The major findings from the report are summarized below.

- **Infrastructure to support a comprehensive strategy to improve school readiness in Virginia has been recently established**, including the creation of the Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives and Virginia's Office of Early Childhood Development. These governance components oversee and coordinate comprehensive initiatives including the work of the School Readiness Task Force, Professional Development Task Force, Home Visiting Consortium, and the Star Quality Advisory Team.
- **Studies indicate that the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) has positive effects on children's school readiness**, as reported by statewide studies of VPI conducted by Virginia's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) and the PALS study team at UVA.
- **Access to preschool in Virginia is lowest for children living in poverty**, as reported in a study conducted by the UVA Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service.
- **It is feasible to expand access to VPI through community/private preschool partnerships, local school readiness collaboratives, and braided funding streams**, as found in a study of the VPI Pilot project.
- **A preschool teacher professional development program improved the quality of VPI classrooms and children's school readiness**, as reported in evaluations of the impacts of MyTeachingPartner conducted by the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) at UVA.
- **The Virginia Star Quality Rating System was created** to support continuous quality improvement and has been pilot tested in 186 preschool classrooms. This year, 350 classrooms in 13 communities will be assessed.
- **A comprehensive statewide definition of school readiness has been created** by the Virginia School Readiness Task Force and endorsed in 2008 by the Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives and the Virginia Board of Education.
- **Resources have been created for Virginia's early childhood educators, program administrators, and parents to improve school readiness**, including the following documents and web-based resources: *Milestones for Child Development*, *Solving the Preschool Puzzle*, *Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals*, *Virginia's Preschool Curriculum Review Rubric and Planning Tool*, *Alignment of Teacher Competencies*, *Grant Project Templates*, and *Early Childhood Career Web site*.

**2008 Virginia School Readiness Report**  
*Prepared by the Virginia School Readiness Task Force*  
December 2008

When children enter kindergarten with basic skills in the areas of literacy, mathematics, science, history, social science, physical and motor development, and personal and social development, they have a much greater chance of achieving success later in school and into adulthood. Children's school readiness depends upon their opportunities within communities, classrooms and families that support development of these skills, and one of the Commonwealth's top priorities is to ensure that Virginia's 105,000 entering kindergartners each year start school ready to learn. The commitment to school readiness in Virginia is evident in numerous statewide efforts to promote opportunities within families, schools, and communities that support children's development of school readiness skills. The 2008 Virginia School Readiness Report is a compendium of recent work related to school readiness in Virginia that is intended to be a useful resource that informs policy makers, researchers, preschool administrators and educators about recent initiatives, research findings, and resources to promote school readiness. The report was prepared by the Virginia School Readiness Task Force, a diverse group of stakeholders including the Superintendent of Public Instruction and other representatives from the Department of Education; the Board of Education; the Department of Social Services; local city councils, school divisions, and early childhood development offices and providers; the PALS office and Virginia's universities and community colleges; the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation; and the Council on Virginia's Future.

The report is divided into three sections that describe efforts to promote school readiness in Virginia related to 1) *statewide infrastructure* to support a comprehensive strategy to improve school readiness, 2) *research* about access to and the quality of preschool in Virginia, and 3) *resources* to guide school readiness improvement efforts. Within each section, brief summaries of each effort and web-links for more information are provided.

### **Statewide Infrastructure to Improve School Readiness**

Statewide infrastructure is needed to support a comprehensive strategy to improve school readiness in Virginia. The initiatives described in this section provide a forum for collaboration for diverse partners; promote dissemination of information for researchers, educators, policymakers and practitioners; and promote awareness of the current issues in early childhood that impact school readiness. They have resulted in multiple strategies for helping programs to partner with local agencies, which in turn helps with efficient program delivery. Many of these collaborative efforts help early childhood educators in their ability to plan and deliver high quality programs and to find training that will help them enhance outcomes for children.

***Virginia's Office of Early Childhood Development.*** Virginia's Office of Early Childhood Development, which spans the Departments of Education and Social Services and links to the Department of Health, was launched for operation July 1, 2008 to maximize opportunities for Virginia's children to reach kindergarten healthy and prepared for school success. The Office's objectives include interagency coordination and program alignment, development of a coordinated professional development system for the early childhood workforce, and establishment of an integrated data system to better inform policy, programming, and budget decisions.

<http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/GovWorkingGroup.cfm>

***Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives.*** The Working Group was created through an executive directive by Governor Kaine in August, 2006, with the purpose of coordinating executive branch efforts on early childhood programs and strengthening public and private programs. The working group, chaired by the Secretary of Education, brings together high-level staff from cabinet offices and state agencies in the areas of Education, Health and Human Resources, Economic Development, Finance and Policy. The Working Group has provided leadership for initiating the following efforts — the Star Quality Initiative, the Home Visiting Consortium, the School Readiness Task Force, and the Early Childhood

Professional Development Initiative — that are designed to improve school readiness in Virginia.

<http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/GovWorkingGroup.cfm>

**The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation.** The Foundation is a public-private partnership, founded in 2005. The Foundation provides grants, training and technical assistance to local and regional Smart Beginnings initiatives. The Foundation collaborates with state government, the business community, parents and early childhood leaders to implement long-term strategies for improving school-readiness for all young children, ages birth to five.

<http://www.vecf.org>

**Smart Beginnings Strategic Plan.** The Governor's Working Group and the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation have partnered to co-lead the implementation of Virginia's Plan for Smart Beginnings, a statewide comprehensive strategic plan to strengthen, integrate, and evaluate early childhood services, infrastructure, and public engagement efforts across the Commonwealth. The plan focuses on five overarching goals in the areas of Governance and Finance, Family Support and Education, Early Care and Education, Health, and Public Engagement, and it serves as a roadmap for Virginia's school readiness vision.

[www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/Virginias\\_Plan\\_Smart\\_Beg.doc](http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/Virginias_Plan_Smart_Beg.doc)

**School Readiness Task Force.** The school readiness task force was convened to focus on developing an effective system for assessing and evaluating the school readiness of Virginia's children. The task force has proposed recommendations to promote statewide data collection efforts to better inform educational policies and classroom practices, and developed Virginia's Definition of School Readiness.

<http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/GovWorkingGroup.cfm>

**Professional Development Task Force.** The professional development task force will make recommendations for a coordinated system to ensure a continuum of high quality professional development opportunities for the early childhood workforce in Virginia. The task force will focus on key components of a professional development system: access, quality, accountability, infrastructure, and funding.

<http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/GovWorkingGroup.cfm>

**Home Visiting Consortium.** The Consortium brings together all state-funded early childhood home visiting programs to discuss home visiting services in Virginia. The group has developed a strong collaborative model which values the unique features each program brings and reduces duplication and gaps in service coverage. The Consortium is developing and piloting common training modules for home visitors of all programs, and is planning for the collection and utilization of common data elements to better inform program and policy.

<http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/GovWorkingGroup.cfm>

## Research on School Readiness in Virginia

Five recent studies related to school readiness in Virginia have been conducted; the results of which identify: 1) benefits of the Virginia Preschool Initiative on children's school readiness; 2) concerns about access to preschool in Virginia for children from economically disadvantaged homes, and 3) promise in methods to improve access to and the quality of preschool programs in Virginia.

**Virginia's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) finds positive effects of VPI participation.** In 2007, the Virginia General Assembly commissioned a study of the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) by JLARC. The JLARC study found positive effects of the program on children's school readiness. Specifically, VPI classrooms tend to provide positive learning environments with high levels of student engagement; children in VPI classrooms show growth in literacy skills across the preschool year (from fall to spring); children from VPI classrooms tend to score higher on kindergarten literacy assessments than other kindergartners; and kindergarten teachers and elementary principals report that VPI graduates are well-prepared socially and academically for kindergarten and later elementary schooling.

These findings identify the important effects of high quality program participation on the literacy components of school readiness. The study also identified seven actions which could be taken to more consistently achieve high quality in VPI classrooms.

<http://jlarc.state.va.us/Reports/Rpt364.pdf>

***UVA Study of VPI and Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) for Kindergarten and preschool students finds positive effects of VPI participation.*** The PALS is used to assess the literacy skills of children who attend kindergarten and students in VPI and other publicly funded preschool programs. Results from PALS-K screenings show that the percentage of students who were identified as needing extra support for learning to read has dropped each year since 2004, with 20 percent identified in 2004 down to 17 percent identified in 2007. Also, a smaller percentage of students who attend public preschool programs are identified in kindergarten as needing extra support to become proficient readers as compared to the kindergarten population as a whole. For example, in the fall of 2007, 11 percent of students screened with PALS in Kindergarten who attended publicly funded preschool in the prior year were identified as needing extra help as compared to 17 percent of all kindergarten children who were screened. Over time, results from PALS-K assessments also show that each year since 2004, a smaller percentage of children participating in public preschool have been identified in kindergarten as needing extra help as compared to the previous year. Results from the PALS-PreK assessments in spring 2008 show that between 85.4 percent and 94.0 percent of VPI preschoolers were within the developmental ranges across all six of the assessed areas: name writing, alphabet knowledge, beginning sounds, rhyme, concepts of print, and nursery rhyme awareness. This reflects an increase from spring 2007 results, which ranged from 82.2 percent and 91.3 percent across the six tasks. Disaggregated data for each year shows that preschool students who participate in VPI and Title I preschool programs are more likely to meet or exceed the developmental ranges on the PALS-PreK assessments, as compared to students who attend other publicly funded preschool programs. The data available do not determine whether these outcomes can be attributed to differences in the programs or differences in the student populations served by various public preschool programs.

<http://pals.virginia.edu>

***Barriers are identified in access to public and private preschool for Virginia's low-income children.***

In 2006, the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center used the United States Census Bureau's American Community Survey to conduct a study of the 105,000 four-year-old children living in Virginia in 2005. Results showed almost 43 percent of those four-year-olds (45,000) were not enrolled in any type of preschool program. Enrollment in preschool was highest among those children from families earning more than three times the poverty threshold (70 percent) while those below the poverty level were enrolled at the lowest rate (40 percent). Four-year-olds not enrolled in preschool were similar to those enrolled in public preschool programs. Both groups tended to come from single parent households, to live in or near poverty, and to have mothers with less education than those enrolled in private preschool programs. These results suggest that access to high quality early learning continues to be a barrier for the state's low-income children.

[http://www.coopercenter.org/demographics/sitefiles/documents/pdfs/numberscount/virginias\\_4-year-olds.pdf](http://www.coopercenter.org/demographics/sitefiles/documents/pdfs/numberscount/virginias_4-year-olds.pdf)

***VPI Access and Feasibility Study indicates that diverse funding is effective in program delivery.*** The Virginia Preschool Pilot Initiative was designed as a one-year experiment to examine the feasibility of increasing access to VPI for more children at risk of school failure by offering state-funded prekindergarten using specific strategies: a) local school readiness collaborative work groups; b) "braiding" of multiple categorical funding streams in programs; and c) partnership among public schools, Head Start programs, and private child care providers. Approximately 280 children participated in some portion of the pilot program during 2007-2008. The results of the pilot demonstrated that diverse preschool delivery is feasible and appears associated with benefits for children at-risk for school difficulties, narrowing the pre-literacy achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers. State guidelines and funding for staff positions and technical support appear to be necessary to help localities blend funding, oversee programs, improve and maintain quality, and accurately collect records. These factors have been

important in successfully developing a mixed delivery model of high-quality prekindergarten for at-risk children in Virginia, and maximizing entry for preschoolers using diverse delivery methods and multiple funding streams.

<http://leg2.state.va.us/dls/h&sdocs.nsf/682def7a6a969fbf85256ec100529ebd/231cd2c4ea5eeee6852574cc004ad11a?OpenDocument>

***A professional development program for VPI teachers improved classroom quality and children's school readiness.*** Over 200 teachers in the Virginia Preschool Initiative participated in the MyTeachingPartner professional development program designed to improve the quality of classroom interactions and children's development of school readiness skills. Teachers received access to a Web site and participated in consultation designed to improve the quality of teachers' interactions with children in classrooms. A study of the effects of the program was conducted by the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia, and results demonstrate that the teaching consultation had a positive influence on classroom quality and children's school readiness. These findings suggest that this particular professional development program has the potential to provide teachers with skills that have a positive impact on children in their classrooms.

[www.myteachingpartner.net](http://www.myteachingpartner.net)

### **Resources to Improve School Readiness in Virginia**

The following resources have been developed for parents, educators, and preschool programs to improve school readiness. The resources are designed to increase knowledge about school readiness and improve the quality of children's experiences in preschool programs.

***Virginia Star Quality Rating System Initiative.*** Virginia's Star Quality Initiative (a Quality Rating and Improvement System) was created to offer a market-based solution to facilitate quality consistency among early childhood programs, support continuous quality improvement in partnership with public and private early education providers, and encourage a continuum of care and education throughout various provider settings, so that all children arrive in kindergarten ready to succeed. The Star Quality Initiative was piloted during the 2007-2008 school year, with 186 classrooms observed by 20 trained Star Quality Raters. Through a corporate grant from Capital One and generous local support, the pilot built on existing local efforts to promote quality in both public and private early childhood settings in 14 Virginia communities. The purpose of the initiative in phase one was not to assign and promote Star ratings, but to test and evaluate the standard and ratings process to ensure reliability and validity. While Star ratings were not publicized, internal data showed a nearly-perfect bell curve distribution of Star levels among programs; 44 percent of programs fell at the 3-Star level, with the majority of those remaining earning 2 or 4 Stars and very few at the 1- or 5-Star levels. Data also indicated a 90 percent rate of consistency between Star Quality Raters.

[www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/gris\\_overview.doc](http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/gris_overview.doc)

[http://www.smartbeginnings.org/index.asp?Type=B\\_BASIC&SEC={56DE82A5-9F30-4390-B6CD-4C90C8D2D282}](http://www.smartbeginnings.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={56DE82A5-9F30-4390-B6CD-4C90C8D2D282})

***Virginia's Definition of School Readiness.*** In 2008, the School Readiness Task Force created a comprehensive definition of school readiness that was endorsed in 2008 by the Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives and by the Board of Education. Virginia's definition of school readiness focuses not only on whether a child has acquired basic skills, but also on the capacities of families, schools, and communities that best support children's acquisition of these skills. This definition provides a common framework for understanding and promoting school readiness across Virginia.

<http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/GovWorkingGroup.cfm>

***Milestones of Child Development.*** The Milestones of Child Development is a resource resulting from the work of Virginia's Alignment Project. This multi-disciplinary team of public and private partners worked together to offer guides to assist adults in their roles with young children. The *Milestones* are a set of child indicators and strategies for adults designed to support the growth and development of young children from



birth to kindergarten entry. It integrates and supports Head Start standards and the Virginia Preschool Initiative's Foundation Blocks.

[http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/MCD\\_6\\_07.pdf](http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/MCD_6_07.pdf)

**Solving the Preschool Puzzle.** In the spring of 2008, seven regional forums were held in communities across the Commonwealth to provide information on the Governor's pre-K proposal, legislative and budget action, and best practice strategies for community planning and service delivery. Presented by the Governor's Working Group in partnership with United Way Success By 6, the forums discussed the latest information on VPI and state-level policy and program activities and provided opportunities for regions to share information and best practices with each other. To inform the discussion, a resource guide for public and private early childhood leaders, entitled "Solving the Preschool Puzzle," was developed and distributed. The guide offers detailed information about collaborative, innovative approaches to deliver early childhood services, samples of Memoranda of Understanding to demonstrate how programs have partnered and braided funding streams, and contact information for individuals across the state that are already employing these best practices in their programs.

<http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/StartStrong/PreschoolPuzzle.pdf>

**Virginia's Foundation Blocks for Early Learning.** From 2001 to 2006, the Department of Education developed the standards, *Virginia's Foundation Blocks for Early Learning*. The purpose of the Foundation Blocks for Early Learning is to provide early childhood educators a set of standards for all content areas, as well as indicators of success for entering kindergarten students pertaining to their competencies in literacy, mathematics, science, history, social science, and the more recently added blocks covering personal and social development and physical and motor development. A committee of Department of Education specialists, literacy and mathematics professors from Virginia universities, and public and private preschool teachers and administrators developed the standards using current scientifically based research. Standards reflect a consensus regarding children's conceptual learning, acquisition of basic knowledge, and participation in meaningful and relevant learning experiences.

[http://www-prod.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/Elem\\_M/FoundationBlocks.pdf](http://www-prod.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/Elem_M/FoundationBlocks.pdf)

**Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals.** The Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals is a resource developed as a part of Virginia's Alignment Project. The Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals includes standards for competent practice, identifying what early childhood professionals must know, be able to do, and care about to provide quality early care and education.

[http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/Comp\\_6\\_07.pdf](http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/Comp_6_07.pdf)

**Virginia's Preschool Curriculum Review Rubric and Planning Tool.** In 2006, the Virginia Board of Education received a three-year grant from the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) for state planning in early childhood education. *Virginia's Preschool Curriculum Review Rubric and Planning Tool*, one product of this grant work, is a valuable resource for preschool teachers, curriculum specialists, preschool directors, and other staff members responsible for educating young children. The rubric can be used to assist early childhood educators in the selection and development of curricula that align with *Virginia's Foundation Blocks for Early Learning*. The rubric is carefully designed to include the five domains essential to early childhood development, which are also indicators of school readiness: cognitive and general knowledge, language development, social and emotional development, physical well being and motor development, and approaches to learning.

[http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Instruction/Elem\\_M/preschool\\_rubric.pdf](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Instruction/Elem_M/preschool_rubric.pdf)

**Virginia School Readiness Evaluation and Education Grant Project Templates.** In order to improve school readiness in Virginia, the Virginia School Readiness Task Force has developed a list of pilot projects for communities, foundations and corporate donors. Each project is designed to be discrete and also to have a clear relationship to the goal of improving school readiness for Virginia children. The goal of this effort is to provide local communities with grant templates they can use for local projects and to help each

community design its project so that it can also be utilized across the Commonwealth of Virginia.

<http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/GovWorkingGroup.cfm>

**Virginia Performs.** Virginia Performs provides policy makers, citizens, government and businesses an easy-to-use portal to information and data about Virginia and its localities. School readiness is one of 46 high-level quality of life indicators measured on Virginia Performs.

<http://www.vaperforms.virginia.gov/i-schoolReadiness.php>

**Alignment of Teacher Competencies.** Teacher competencies for the PreK-3 and PreK-6 teaching endorsements were aligned with Virginia's *Foundation Blocks for Early Learning: Comprehensive Standards for Four-Year-Olds* and the recently produced document from the state's Early Childhood Education's Alignment Project, *Milestones of Child Development and Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals*.

<http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Compliance/TeacherED/nulicvr.pdf>.

**Early Childhood Career Web Site and Degree Transfer Agreements.** The NASBE committee worked with Virginia's Community College System (VCCS) to develop a web site and brochure to assist future early childhood professionals with understanding educational opportunities for a career in early childhood education. This coincides with the launching of a VCCS common degree in early childhood education. The requirements for the Associate's in Applied Sciences (A.A.S) in early childhood development include the same courses and portfolio items at all of the Virginia Community College System institutions as of fall 2008. This common degree, aligned with Virginia's *Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals*, will help to further facilitate the unique transfer programs with four-year colleges and universities providing opportunities for students seeking applied degrees that lead them straight to the workforce. Virginia Community Colleges have agreements with Norfolk State University, George Mason University, Virginia Commonwealth University and Averett University. The web site is regularly updated to reflect articulated transfer agreements, and information regarding these programs was distributed to early childhood stakeholders across the state including high school guidance counselors, career coordinators, technical education coordinators, VCCS representatives, and Virginia Preschool Initiative coordinators. A copy of the brochure and the transfer agreements are on the Web site.

<http://www.vccs.edu/Students/Transfer/tabid/106/Default.aspx>

<http://myfuture.vccs.edu/Portals/0/ContentAreas/Transfer/k12-brochure-page1n2.pdf>.

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